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John I. Chandler

ALCIPHRON.

ALCIPHRON,

A Poem.

BY THOMAS MOORE, ESQ.

AUTHOR OF LALLA ROOKH, ETC., ETC.

PHILADELPHIA:

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ALCIPHRON.

LETTER I.

FROM ALCIPHRON AT ALEXANDRIA TO CLEON AT ATHENS.

WELL may you wonder at my flight
From those fair Gardens, in whose bowers
Lingers whate'er of wise and bright,
Of Beauty's smile or Wisdom's light,
Is left to grace this world of ours.
Well may my comrades, as they roam,
On evenings sweet as this, inquire
Why I have left that happy home
Where all is found that all desire,
And Time hath wings that never tire;
Where bliss, in all the countless shapes
That Fancy's self to bliss hath given,
Comes clustering round, like road-side grapes
That woo the traveller's lip, at even;

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Where Wisdom flings not joy away,—
As Pallas in the stream, they say,
Once flung her flute,—but smiling owns
That woman's lip can send forth tones
Worth all the music of those spheres
So many dream of, but none hears ;
Where Virtue's self puts on so well
Her sister Pleasure's smile that, loth
From either nymph apart to dwell,
We finish by embracing both.

Yes, such the place of bliss, I own,
From all whose charms I just have flown :
And ev'n while thus to thee I write,

And by the Nile's dark flood recline,
Fondly, in thought, I wing my flight
Back to those groves and gardens bright,
And often think, by this sweet light,

How lovelily they all must shine ;
Can see that graceful temple throw

Down the green slope its lengthen'd shade,
While, on the marble steps below,

There sits some fair Athenian maid,
Over some favourite volume bending ;

And, by her side, a youthful sage
Holds back the ringlets that, descending,
Would else o'ershadow all the page.

But hence such thoughts!—nor let me grieve
O'er scenes of joy that I but leave,
As the bird quits awhile its nest
To come again with livelier zest.

And now to tell thee—what I fear
Thou'lt gravely smile at—*why* I'm here.
Though through my life's short, sunny dream,
I've floated without pain or care,
Like a light leaf, down pleasure's stream,
Caught in each sparkling eddy there;
Though never Mirth awaked a strain
That my heart echoed not again;
Yet have I felt, when ev'n most gay,
Sad thoughts—I know not whence or why—
Suddenly o'er my spirit fly,
Like clouds, that, ere we've time to say
“How bright the sky is!” shade the sky.
Sometimes so vague, so undefin'd
Were these strange darkenings of my mind—
While nought but joy around me beam'd
So causelessly they've come and flown,
That not of life or earth they seem'd,
But shadows from some world unknown.
More oft, however, 'twas the thought
How soon that scene, with all its play
Of life and gladness must decay,—

Those lips I prest, the hands I caught—
Myself,—the crowd that mirth had brought
Around me,—swept like weeds away .

This thought it was that came to shed
O'er rapture's hour its worst alloys ;
And, close as shade with sunshine, wed
Its sadness with my happiest joys.
Oh, but for this disheart'ning voice
Stealing amid our mirth to say
That all, in which we most rejoice,
Ere night may be the earth-worm's prey—
But for this bitter—only this—
Full as the world is brimm'd with bliss,
And capable as feels my soul
Of draining to its dregs the whole,
I should turn earth to heav'n, and be,
If bliss made Gods, a Deity !

Thou know'st that night—the very last
That with my Garden friends I pass'd—
When the School held its feast of mirth
To celebrate our founder's birth.
And all that He in dreams but saw
When he set Pleasure on the throne
Of this bright world, and wrote her law
In human hearts, was felt and known—

Not in unreal dreams, but true,
Substantial joy as pulse e'er knew,—
By hearts and bosoms, that each felt
Itself the realm where Pleasure dwelt.

That night, when all our mirth was o'er,
The minstrels silent, and the feet
Of the young maidens heard no more—
So stilly was the time, so sweet,
And such a calm came o'er that scene,
Where life and revel late had been—
Lone as the quiet of some bay,
From which the sea hath ebb'd away—
That still I linger'd, lost in thought,
Gazing upon the stars of night,
Sad and intent, as if I sought
Some mournful secret in their light ;
And ask'd them, mid that silence, why
Man, glorious man, alone must die,
While they, less wonderful than he,
Shine on through all eternity.

That night—thou haply may'st forget
Its loveliness—but 'twas a night
To make earth's meanest slave regret
Leaving a world so soft and bright.
On one side, in the dark blue sky,
Lonely and radiant, was the eye

Of Jove himself, while, on the other,
'Mong stars that came out one by one,
The young moon—like the Roman mother
Among her living jewels—shone.
“ Oh that from yonder orbs,” I thought,
“ Pure and eternal as they are,
There could to earth some power be brought
Some charm, with their own essence fraught,
To make man deathless as a star,
And open to his vast desires
A course, as boundless and sublime
As lies before those comet-fires,
That roam and burn throughout all time !”

While thoughts like these absorb'd my mind,
That weariness which earthly bliss,
However sweet, still leaves behind,
As if to show how earthly 'tis,
Came lulling o'er me, and I laid
My limbs at that fair statue's base—
That miracle, which Art hath made
Of all the choice of Nature's grace—
To which so oft I've knelt and sworn,
That, could a living maid like her
Unto this wondering world be born,
I would, myself, turn worshipper.

Sleep came then o'er me,—and I seem'd
To be transported far away
To a bleak desert plain, where gleam'd
One single, melancholy ray,
Throughout that darkness dimly shed
From a small taper in the hand
Of one, who, pale as are the dead,
Before me took his spectral stand,
And said, while, awfully a smile
Came o'er the wanness of his cheek—
“Go, and, beside the sacred Nile,
You'll find th' Eternal Life you seek.”

Soon as he spoke these words, the hue
Of death upon his features grew—
Like the pale morning, when o'er night
She gains the victory—full of light;
While the small torch he held became
A glory in his hand, whose flame
Brighten'd the desert suddenly,
Ev'n to the far horizon's line—
Along whose level I could see
Gardens and groves, that seem'd to shine.
As if then freshly o'er them played
A vernal rainbow's rich cascade.
While music was heard every where,
Breathing, as 'twere itself the air,

And spirits, on whose wings the hue
Of heav'n still linger'd, round me flew,
Till from all sides such splendours broke,
That with the excess of light, I woke!

Such was my dream ;—and, I confess,
Though none of all our creedless school
Hath e'er believ'd, or reverenc'd less

The fables of the priest-led fool,
Who tells us of a soul, a mind,
Separate and pure, within us shrin'd,
Which is to live—ah hope too bright!—
For ever in yon fields of light ;—

Who fondly thinks the guardian eyes
Of Gods are on him,—as if, blest
And blooming in their own blue skies,
Th' eternal Gods were not too wise

To let weak man disturb their rest!—
Though thinking of such creeds as thou

And all our Garden sages think,
Yet is there something, I allow,

In dreams like this—a sort of link
With worlds unseen, which, from the hour

I first could lisp my thoughts till now,
Hath master'd me with spell-like power.

And who can tell, as we're combin'd
Of various atoms,—some refined,

Like those that scintillate and play
In the fix'd stars,—some, gross as they
That frown in clouds or sleep in clay,—
Who can be sure, but 'tis the best
 And brightest atoms of our frame,
 Those most akin to stellar flame,
That shine out thus, when we're at rest;—
Ev'n as their kindred stars, whose light
Comes out but in the silent night.
Or is it that there lurks, indeed,
Some truth in Man's prevailing creed,
And that our Guardians, from on high,
 Come, in that pause from toil and sin,
To put the senses' curtain by,
 And on the wakeful soul look in !

Vain thought!—but yet, howe'er it be,
Dreams, more than once, have prov'd to me
Oracles, truer far than Oak,
Or Dove, or Tripod ever spoke.
And 'twas the words—thou'lt hear and smile—
 The words that phantom seem'd to speak—
“Go, and beside the sacred Nile
 You'll find the Eternal life you seek,—”
That, haunting me by night, by day,
 At length, as with the unseen hand
Of Fate itself, urg'd me away
 From Athens to this Holy Land ;

Where, 'mong the secrets, still untaught,
The myst'ries that, as yet, nor sun
Nor eye hath reach'd—oh blessed thought!—
May sleep this everlasting one.

Farewell—when to our Garden friends
Thou talk'st of the wild dream that sends
The gayest of their school thus far,
Wandering beneath Canopus' star,
Tell them that, wander where he will,
Or, howsoe'er they now condemn
His vague and vain pursuit, he still
Is worthy of the School and them;—
Still, all their own,—nor e'er forgets,
Ev'n while his heart and soul pursue
Th' Eternal Light which never sets,
The many meteor joys that *do*,
But seeks them, hails them with delight
Where'er they meet his longing sight.
And, if his life must wane away,
Like other lives, at least the day,
'The hour it lasts shall, like a fire
With incense fed, in sweets expire.

LETTER 11.

FROM THE SAME TO THE SAME.

Memphis.

'Tis true, alas—the mysteries and the lore
Came to study on this wondrous shore,
Are all forgotten in the new delights,
The strange, wild joys that fill my days and nights.
Instead of dark, dull oracles that speak
From subterranean temples, those *I* seek
Come from the breathing shrines, where Beauty lives,
And Love, her priest, the soft responses gives.
Instead of honouring Isis in those rites
At Coptos held, I hail her, when she lights
Her first young crescent on the holy stream—
When wandering youths and maidens watch her beam
And number o'er the nights she hath to run,
Ere she again embrace her bridegroom sun.
While o'er some mystic leaf, that dimly lends
A clue into past times, the student bends,

And by its glimmering guidance learns to tread
Back through the shadowy knowledge of the dead,—
The only skill, alas, *I* yet can claim
Lies in deciphering some new lov'd-one's name—
Some gentle missive, hinting time and place,
In language, soft as Memphian reed can trace.

And where—oh where's the heart that could withstand
Th' unnumbered witcheries of this sun-born land,
Where first young Pleasure's banner was unfurl'd,
And Love hath temples ancient as the world !
Where mystery, like the veil by Beauty worn,
Hides but to heighten, shades but to adorn ;
And that luxurious melancholy, born
Of passion and of genius, sheds a gloom
Making joy holy ;—where the bower and tomb
Stand side by side, and Pleasure learns from Death
The instant value of each moment's breath.
Couldst thou but see how like a poet's dream
This lovely land now looks !—the glorious stream,
That late, between its banks, was seen to glide
'Mong shrines and marble cities, on each side
Glittering like jewels strung along a chain,
Hath now sent forth its waters, and o'er plain
And valley, like a giant from his bed
Rising with out-stretch'd limbs, hath grandly spread.

While far as sight can reach, beneath as clear
And blue a heav'n as ever bless'd our sphere,
Gardens, and pillar'd streets, and porphyry domes,
And high-built temples, fit to be the homes
Of mighty Gods, and pyramids, whose hour
Outlasts all time, above the waters tower !

Then, too, the scenes of pomp and joy, that make
One theatre of this vast, peopled lake,
Where all that Love, Religion, Commerce gives
Of life and motion, ever moves and lives.
Here, up the steps of temples from the wave
Ascending in procession slow and grave,
Priests in white garments go, with sacred wands
And silver cymbals gleaming in their hands ;
While there, rich barks—fresh from those sunny tracts
Far off, beyond the sounding cataracts—
Glide, with their precious lading to the sea,
Plumes of bright birds, rhinoceros ivory,
Gems from the isle of Meroe, and those grains
Of gold, wash'd down by Abyssinian rains.
Here, where the waters wind into a bay
Shadowy and cool, some pilgrims, on their way
To Sais or Bubastus, among beds
Of lotus flowers, that close above their heads,
Push their light barks, and there, as in a bower,
Sing, talk, or sleep away the sultry hour—

Oft dipping in the Nile, when faint with heat,
That leaf, from which its waters drink most sweet.
While haply, not far off, beneath a bank
Of blossoming acacias, many a prank
Is played in the cool current by a train
Of laughing nymphs, lovely as she,* whose chain
Around two conquerors of the world was cast
But, for a third too feeble, broke at last.

For oh, believe not them, who dare to brand,
As poor in charms, the women of this land.
Though darken'd by that sun, whose spirit flows
Through every vein, and tinges as it goes,
'Tis but th' embrowning of the fruit that tells
How rich within the soul of ripeness dwells,—
The hue their own dark sanctuaries wear,
Announcing heav'n in half-caught glimpses there.
And never yet did tell-tale looks set free
The secret of young hearts more tenderly.
Such eyes!—long, shadowy, with that languid fall
Of the fring'd lids, which may be seen in all
Who live beneath the sun's too ardent rays—
Lending such looks as, on their marriage days
Young maids cast down before a bridegroom's gaze!
Then for their grace—mark but the nymph-like shapes
Of the young village girls, when carrying grapes

* Cleopatra.

From green Anthylla, or light urns of flowers—
Not our own Sculpture, in her happiest hours,
E'er imag'd forth, even at the touch of him*
Whose touch was life, more luxury of limb !
Then, canst thou wonder if, mid scenes like these,
I should forget all graver mysteries,
All lore but Love's, all secrets but that best
In heav'n or earth, the art of being blest !

Yet are there times,—though brief, I own, their stay,
Like summer-clouds that shine themselves away,—
Moments of gloom, when ev'n these pleasures pall
Upon my sadd'ning heart, and I recall
That Garden dream—that promise of a power,
Oh were there such !—to lengthen out life's hour
On, on, as through a vista, far away
Opening before us into endless day !
And chiefly o'er my spirit did this thought
Come on that evening—bright as ever brought
Light's golden farewell to the world—when first
The eternal pyramids of Memphis burst
Awfully on my sight—standing sublime
'Twixt earth and heav'n, the watch-towers of Time,
From whose lone summit, when his reign hath past
From earth for ever, he will look his last !

* Apelles

There hung a calm and solemn sunshine round
Those mighty monuments, a hushing sound
In the still air that circled them, which stole
Like music of past times into my soul.
I thought what myriads of the wise and brave
And beautiful had sunk into the grave,
Since earth first saw these wonders—and I said
“Are things eternal only for the Dead ?
Is there for Man no hope—but this, which dooms
His only lasting trophies to be tombs !
But *'tis* not so—earth, heaven, all nature shows
He *may* become immortal,—*may* uncloset
The wings within him wrapt, and proudly rise
Redeem'd from earth, a creature of the skies !

“And who can say, among the written spells
From Hermes' hand, that, in these shrines and cells
Have, from the Flood, lay hid, there may not be
Some secret clue to immortality,
Some amulet, whose spell can keep life's fire
Awake within us, never to expire !
'Tis known that, on the Emerald Table,* hid
For ages in yon loftiest pyramid,
The Thrice-Great† did himself, engrave, of old,
The chymic mystery that gives endless gold.

* See Notes on the Epicurean.

† The Hermes Trismegistus.

And why may not this mightier secret dwell
Within the same dark chambers ? who can tell
But that those kings, who, by the written skill
Of th' Emerald Table, call'd forth gold at will,
And quarries upon quarries heap'd and hurl'd,
To build them domes that might outstand the world—
Who knows but that the heavenlier art, which shares
The life of Gods with man, was also theirs—
That they themselves, triumphant o'er the power
Of fate and death, are living at this hour ;
And these, the giant homes they still possess,
Not tombs, but everlasting palaces,
Within whose depths, hid from the world above,
Even now they wander, with the few they love,
Through subterranean gardens, by a light
Unknown on earth, which hath nor dawn nor night !
Else, why those deathless structures ? why the grand
And hidden halls, that undermine this land ?
Why else hath none of earth e'er dared to go
Through the dark windings of that realm below,
Nor aught from heav'n itself, except the God
Of Silence, through those endless labyrinths trod ?"

Thus did I dream—wild, wandering dreams, I own,
But such as haunt me ever, if alone,
Or in that 'pause 'twixt joy and joy I be,
Like a ship hush'd between two waves at sea.

Then do these spirit whisperings, like the sound
Of the Dark Future, come appalling round ;
Nor can I break the trance that holds me then,
Till high o'er Pleasure's surge I mount again !

Ev'n now for new adventure, new delight,
My heart is on the wing—this very night,
The Temple on that island, half-way o'er
From Memphis' gardens to the eastern shore,
Sends up its annual rite* to her, whose beams
Bring the sweet time of night-flowers and dreams ;
The nymph, who dips her urn in silent lakes,
And turns to silvery dew each drop it takes ;—
Oh, not our Dian of the North, who chains
In vestal ice the current of young veins,
But she who haunts the gay Bubastian† grove,
And owns she sees, from her bright heav'n above,
Nothing on earth to match that heav'n but Love.
Thinks then, what bliss will be abroad to-night !
Beside, that host of nymphs, who meet the sight
Day after day, familiar as the sun,
Coy buds of beauty, yet unbreath'd upon,
And all the hidden loveliness, that lies,
Shut up, as are the beams of sleeping eyes,

* The great Festival of the Moon.

† Bubastis, or Isis, was the Diana of the Egyptian mythology.

Within these twilight shrines—to-night will be,
Soon as the Moon's white bark in heav'n we see,
Let loose, like birds, for this festivity !

And mark, 'tis nigh ; already the sun bids
His evening farewell to the Pyramids,
As he hath done, age after age, till they
Alone on earth seem ancient as his ray ;
While their great shadows, stretching from the light,
Look like the first colossal steps of Night,
Stretching across the valley, to invade
The distant hills of porphyry with their shade.
Around, as signals of the setting beam,
Gay, gilded flags on every house-top gleam :
While, hark !—from all the temples a rich swell
Of music to the Moon—farewell—farewell.

LETTER III.

FROM THE SAME TO THE SAME.

Memphis.

THERE is some star—or it may be
That moon we saw so near last night—
Which comes athwart my destiny
For ever, with misleading light.
If for a moment, pure and wise
And calm I feel, there quick doth fall
A spark from some disturbing eyes,
That through my heart, soul, being flies,
And makes a wildfire of it all.
I've seen—oh, Cleon, that this earth
Should e'er have giv'n such beauty birth!—
That man—but, hold—hear all that pass'd
Since yester-night, from first to last.

The rising of the Moon, calm, slow,
And beautiful, as if she came
Fresh from the Elysian bowers below,
Was, with a loud and sweet accla im

Welcom'd from every breezy height,
Where crowds stood waiting for her light.
And well might they who view'd the scene
Then lit up all around them, say,
That never yet had Nature been
Caught sleeping in a lovelier ray,
Or rival'd her own noon-tide face,
With purer show of moonlight grace.

Memphis,—still grand, though not the same
Unrival'd Memphis, that could seize
From ancient Thebes the crown of Fame,
And wear it bright through centuries—
Now, in the moonshine, that came down
Like a last smile upon that crown,
Memphis, still grand, among her lakes,
Her pyramids and shrines of fire,
Rose, like a vision, that half breaks
On one who, dreaming, still, awakes
To music from some midnight choir :
While to the west, where gradual sinks
In the red sands, from Libya roll'd,
Some mighty column, or fair sphynx,
That stood, in kingly courts, of old,
It seem'd as, mid the pomps that shone
Thus, gaily round him, Time look'd on,
Waiting till all, now bright and blest,
Should fall beneath him like the rest.

No sooner had the setting sun
Proclaim'd the festal rite begun,
And, mid their idol's fullest beams,
 The Egyptian world was all afloat,
Than I, who live upon these streams,
 Like a young Nile-bird, turn'd my boat
To the fair island, on whose shores,
Through leafy palms and sycamores,
Already shone the moving lights
Of pilgrims, hastening to the rites.
While, far around, like ruby sparks
Upon the water, lighted barks,
Of every form and kind—from those
 That down Syene's cataract shoots,
To the grand, gilded barge, that rows
 To sound of tambours and of flutes,
And wears at night, in words of flame,
On the rich prow, its master's name ;—
All were alive, and made this sea
 Of cities busy as a hill
Of summer ants, caught suddenly
 In the overflowing of a rill.

Landed upon the isle, I soon
 Through marble alleys and small groves
 Of that mysterious palm she loves,
Reach'd the fair Temple of the Moon ;

And there—as slowly through the last
Dim-lighted vestibule I pass'd—
Between the porphyry pillars, twin'd
 With palm and ivy, I could see
A band of youthful maidens wind,
 In measur'd walk, half dancingly,
Round a small shrine, on which was plac'd
 That bird,* whose plumes of black and white
Wear in their hue, by Nature trac'd,
 A type of the moon's shadow'd light.

In drapery, like woven snow,
'These nymphs were clad, and each, below
The rounded bosom, loosely wore
 A dark blue zone, or bandelet,
With little silver stars all o'er,
 As are the skies at midnight, set.
While in their tresses, braided through,
 Sparkled the flower of Egypt's lakes,
The silvery lotus, in whose hue
 As much delight the young Moon takes,
As doth the Day-God to behold
 The lofty bean-flower's buds of gold.
And, as they gracefully went round
 The worshipp'd bird, some to the beat
Of castanets, some to the sound
 Of the shrill sistrum tim'd their feet ;

* The Ibis.

While others, at each step they took,
A tinkling chain of silver shook.

They seem'd all fair—but there was one
On whom the light had not yet shone,
Or shone but partly—so downcast
She held her brow, as slow she pass'd.
And yet to me, there seemed to dwell

A charm about that unseen face—
A something, in the shade that fell

Over that brow's imagin'd grace,
Which took me more than all the best
Outshining beauties of the rest.

And her alone my eyes could see,
Enchain'd by this sweet mystery ;
And her alone I watch'd, as round
She glided o'er that marble ground,
Stirring not more th' unconscious air
Than if a Spirit had moved there.

Till suddenly, wide open flew.

The Temple's folding gates, and threw
A splendour from within, a flood
Of Glory where these maidens stood.

While, with that light,—as if the same
Rich source gave birth to both, there came
A swell of harmony, as grand
As e'er was born of voice and hand,

Filling the gorgeous aisles around
With that mix'd burst of light and sound.

Then was it, by the flash that blaz'd
Full o'er her features — oh 'twas then,
As startingly her eyes she rais'd,
But quick let fall their lids again,
I saw—not Psyche's self, when first
Upon the threshold of the skies.
She paus'd, while heaven's glory burst
Newly upon her downcast eyes,
Could look more beautiful or blush
With holier shame than did this maid,
Whom now I saw, in all that gush
Of splendour from the aisles, display'd.
Never—tho' well thou know'st how much
I've felt the sway of Beauty's star—
Never did her bright influence touch
My soul into its depths so far;
And had that vision linger'd there
One minute more, I should have flown,
Forgetful *who* I was and where,
And, at her feet in worship thrown,
Proffer'd my soul through life her own.

But, scarcely had that burst of light
And music broke on ear and sight,

Than up the aisle the bird took wing,
As if on heavenly mission sent,
While after him, with graceful spring,
Like some unearthly creatures, meant
To live in that mix'd element
Of light and song, the young maids went ;
And she, who in my heart had thrown
A spark to burn for life, was flown,

In vain I tried to follow ;—bands
Of reverend chanters fill'd the aisle :
Where'er I sought to pass, their wands
Motion'd me back, while many a file
Of sacred nymphs—but ah, not they
Whom my eyes look'd for—throng'd the way.
Perplex'd, impatient, mid this crowd
Of faces, lights—the o'erwhelming cloud
Of incense round me, and my blood
Full of its new-born fire,—I stood,
Nor mov'd, nor breath'd, but when I caught
A glimpse of some blue, spangled zone,
Or wreath of lotus, which, I thought,
Like those she wore at distance shone.

But no, 'twas vain—hour after hour,
Till my heart's throbbing turn'd to pain,
And my strain'd eyesight lost its power,
I sought her thus, but all in vain.

At length, hot,—wilder'd,—in despair,
I rush'd into the cool night-air,
And hurrying (though with many a look
Back to the busy Temple) took
My way along the moonlight shore,
And sprung into my boat once more.

There is a Lake, that to the north
Of Memphis stretches grandly forth,
Upon whose silent shore the Dead
Have a proud City of their own,*
With shrines and pyramids o'erspread,—
Where many an ancient kingly head
Slumbers, immortaliz'd in stone ;
And where, through marble grotts beneath,
The lifeless, rang'd like sacred things,
Nor wanting aught of life but breath,
Lie in their painted coverings,
And on each new successive race,
That visit their dim haunts below,
Look with the same unwithering face,
They wore three thousand years ago.
There, Silence, thoughtful God, who loves
The neighbourhood of death, in groves
Of asphodel lies hid, and weaves
His hushing spell among the leaves,—

* Necropolis, or the City of the Dead, to the south of Memphis.

Nor ever noise disturbs the air,
Save the low, humming, mournful sound
Of priests, within their shrines, at prayer
For the fresh Dead entomb'd around.

'Twas tow'rd this place of death—in mood
Made up of thoughts, half bright, half dark—
I now across the shining flood
Unconscious turn'd my light-wing'd bark.
The form of that young maid, in all
Its beauty, was before me still ;
And oft I thought, if thus to call
Her image to my mind at will,
If but the memory of that one
Bright look of hers, for ever gone,
Was to my heart worth all the rest
Of woman-kind, beheld, possest—
What would it be, if wholly mine,
Within these arms, as in a shrine,
Hallow'd by Love, I saw her shine,
An idol, worshipp'd by the light
Of her own beauties, day and night—
If 'twas a blessing but to see
And lose again, what would *this* be ?

In thoughts like these—but often crost
By darker threads—my mind was lost,

Till, near that City of the Dead,
Wak'd from my trance, I saw o'erhead—
As if by some enchanter bid

Suddenly from the wave to rise—
Pyramid over pyramid

Tower in succession to the skies ;
While one, aspiring, as if soon

'Twould touch the heavens, rose o'er all ;
And, on its summit, the white moon
Rested, as on a pedestal !

The silence of the lonely tombs

And temples round, where nought was heard
But the high palm-tree's tufted plumes,
Shaken, at times, by breeze or bird,
Form'd a deep contrast to the scene
Of revel, where I late had been ;
To those gay sounds, that still came o'er,
Faintly, from many a distant shore,
And th' unnumber'd lights, that shone
Far o'er the flood, from Memphis on
To the Moon's Isle and Babylon.

My oars were lifted, and my boat

Lay rock'd upon the rippling stream ;
While my vague thoughts, alike afloat,
Drifted through many an idle dream,

With all of which, wild and unfix'd
As was their aim, that vision mix'd,
That bright nymph of the Temple—now
With the same innocence of brow
She wore within the lighted fane,—
Now kindling, through each pulse and vein
With passion of such deep-felt fire
As Gods might glory to inspire;—
And now—oh Darkness of the tomb,
That must eclipse ev'n light like hers!
Cold, dead, and blackening mid the gloom
Of those eternal sepulchres.

Scarce had I turn'd my eyes away
From that dark death-place, at the thought,
When by the sound of dashing spray
From a light oar my ear was caught,
While past me, through the moonlight, sail'd
A little gilded bark, that bore
Two female figures, closely veil'd
And mantled, towards that funeral shore.
They landed—and the boat again
Put off across the watery plain.

Shall I confess—to *thee* I may—
That never yet hath come the chance
If a new music, a new ray
From woman's voice, from woman's glance,

Which—let it find me how it might,

In joy or grief—I did not bless,

And wander after, as a light

Leading to undreamt happiness.

And chiefly now, when hopes so vain

Were stirring in my heart and brain,

When Fancy had allur'd my soul

Into a chase, as vague and far

As would be his, who fix'd his goal

In the horizon, or some star—

Any bewilderment, that brought

More near to earth my high-flown thought—

The faintest glimpse of joy, less pure,

Less high and heavenly, but more sure,

Came welcome—and was then to me

What the first flowery isle must be

To vagrant birds, blown out to sea,

Quick to the shore I urged my bark,

And, by the bursts of moonlight, shed

Between the lofty tombs, could mark

Those figures, as with hasty tread

They glided on—till in the shade

Of a small pyramid, which through

Some boughs of palm its peak display'd,

They vanish'd instant from my view.

I hurried to the spot—no trace
Of life was in that lonely place ;
And, had the creed I hold by taught
Of other worlds, I might have thought
Some mocking spirits had from thence
Come in this guise to cheat my sense.

At length, exploring darkly round
The Pyramid's smooth sides, I found
An iron portal,—opening high
 'Twixt peak and base—and, with a pray'r
To the bliss-loving moon, whose eye
 Alone beheld me, sprung in there.
Downward the narrow stairway led
Through many a duct obscure and dread,
 A labyrinth for mystery made,
With wanderings onward, backward, round,
And gathering still, where'er it wound,
 But deeper density of shade.

Scarce had I ask'd myself " Can aught
 That man delights in sojourn here ?"—
When, suddenly, far off, I caught
 A glimpse of light, remote, but clear,—
Whose welcome glimmer seem'd to pour
 From some alcove or cell, that ended
The long, steep, marble corridor,
 Through which I now, all hope, descended.

Never did Spartan to his bride
With warier foot at midnight glide,
It seem'd as echo's self were dead
In this dark place, so mute my tread,
Reaching, at length, that light, I saw—

Oh listen to the scene, now raised
Before my eyes—then guess the awe,
The still, rapt awe with which I gazed.

'Twas a small chapel, lin'd around
With the fair, spangling marble, found
In many a ruin'd shrine that stands
Half seen above the Libyan sands.
The walls were richly sculptur'd o'er,
And character'd with that dark lore
Of times before the Flood, whose key
Was lost in th' 'Universal Sea,'—

While on the roof was pictured bright

The Theban beetle, as he shines,

When the Nile's mighty flow declines,
And forth the creature springs to light,
With life regenerate in his wings :
Emblem of vain imaginings !
Of a new world, when this is gone,
In which the spirit still lives on !

Direct beneath this type, reclin'd

On a black granite altar, lay

A female form, in crystal shrin'd,
And looking fresh as if the ray
Of soul had fled but yesterday,
While in relief, of silvery hue,
Graved on the altar's front were seen
A branch of lotus, brok'n in two,
As that fair creature's life had been,
And a small bird that from its spray
Was winging, like her soul, away.

But brief the glimpse I now could spare
To the wild, mystic wonders round ;
For there was yet *one* wonder there,
That held me as by witchery bound.
The lamp, that through the chamber shed
Its vivid beam, was at the head
Of her who on that altar slept ;
And near it stood, when first I came,—
Bending her brow, as if she kept
Sad watch upon its silent flame—
A female form, as yet so plac'd
Between the lamp's strong glow and me,
That I but saw, in outline trac'd,
The shadow of her symmetry.
Yet did my heart—I scarce knew why—
Ev'n at that shadow'd shape beat high.

Nor long was it, ere full in sight
The figure turn'd ; and, by the light
That touch'd her features, as she bent,
Over the crystal monument,
I saw 'twas she—the same—the same—
That lately stood before me—bright'ning
The holy spot, where she but came
And went again, like summer lightning !

Upon the crystal, o'er the breast
Of her who took that silent rest,
There was a cross of silver lying—
Another type of that blest home,
Which hope, and pride, and fear of dying
Build for us in a world to come :—
This silver cross the maiden rais'd
To her pure lips ;—then, having gazed
Some minutes on that tranquil face,
Sleeping in all death's mournful grace,
Upward she turn'd her brow serene,
As if, intent on heaven, those eyes
Saw then nor roof nor cloud between
Their own pure orbits and the skies ;
And, though her lips no motion made,
And that fix'd look was all her speech,
I saw that the rapt spirit prayed
Deeper within than words could reach.

Strange pow'r of Innocence, to turn
To its own hue whate'er comes near;
And make even vagrant Passion burn
With purer warmth within its sphere!
She who, but one short hour before,
Had come, like sudden wild-fire, o'er
My heart and brain,—whom gladly, even
From that bright Temple, in the face
Of those proud ministers of heaven,
I would have borne, in wild embrace,
And risk'd all punishment, divine
And human, but to make her mine;—
That maid was now before me, thrown
By fate itself into my arms—
There standing, beautiful, alone,
With nought to guard her, but her charms.
Yet did I—oh did ev'n a breath
From my parch'd lips, too parch'd to move,
Disturb a scene where thus, beneath
Earth's silent covering, Youth and Death
Held converse through undying love?
No—smile and taunt me as thou wilt—
Though but to gaze thus was delight,
Yet seem'd it like a wrong, a guilt,
To win by stealth so pure a sight;
And rather than a look profane

Should then have met those thoughtful eyes,
Or voice, or whisper broke the chain
That link'd her spirit with the skies,
I would have gladly, in that place,
From which I watch'd her heav'n-ward face,
Let my heart break, without one beat
That could disturb a prayer so sweet.

Gently, as if on every tread,
My life, my more than life depended,
Back through the corridor that led
To this blest scene I now ascended,
And with slow seeking, and some pain,
And many a winding tried in vain,
Emerg'd to upper air again.

The sun had freshly ris'n, and down
The marble hills of Araby,
Scatter'd, as from a conqueror's crown,
His beams into that living sea.
There seem'd a glory in his light,
Newly put on—as if for pride
Of the high homage paid this night
To his own Isis, his young bride,
Now fading feminine away
In her proud Lord's superior ray.

My mind's first impulse was to fly
At once from this entangling net—
New scenes to range, new loves to try,
Or, in mirth, wine, and luxury
Of every sense, that night forget.
But vain the effort—spell-bound still,
I linger'd, without power or will
To turn my eyes from that dark door,
Which now enclos'd her 'mong the dead ;
Oft fancying, through the boughs, that o'er
The sunny pile their flickering shed,
'Twas her light form again I saw
Starting to earth—still pure and bright,
But wakening, as I hop'd, less awe,
Thus seen by morning's natural light,
Than in that strange, dim cell at night.

But no, alas,—she ne'er return'd :
Nor yet—tho' still I watch—nor yet,
Though the red sun for hours hath burn'd,
And now, in his mid course, had met
The peak of that eternal pile
He pauses still at noon to bless,
Standing beneath his downward smile,
Like a great Spirit, shadowless !
Nor yet she comes—while here, alone,
Saunt'ring through this death-peopled place,

Where no heart beats except my own,
Or 'neath a palm-tree's shelter thrown,
By turns I watch, and rest, and trace
These lines, that are to waft to thee
My last night's wondrous history.

Dost thou remember, in that Isle
Of our own Sea, where thou and I
Linger'd so long, so happy a while,
Till all the summer flowers went by—
How gay it was when sunset brought
To the cool Well our favourite maids—
Some we had won, and some we sought—
To dance within the fragrant shades,
And, till the stars went down, attune
Their Fountain Hymns* to the young moon ?

That time, too—oh, 'tis like a dream—
When from Scamander's holy tide
I sprung, as Genius of the Stream,
And bore away that blooming bride,
Who thither came, to yield her charms
(As Phrygian maids are wont, ere wed)
Into the cold Scamander's arms,
But met, and welcom'd mine, instead—

* These Songs of the Well, as they were called by the ancients, are still common in the Greek isles.

Wondering, as on my neck she fell,
How river-gods could love so well !
Who would have thought that he, who rov'd
Like the first bees of summer then,
Rifling each sweet, nor ever lov'd
But the free hearts, that lov'd again,
Readily as the reed replies
To the last breath that round it sighs—
Is the same dreamer who, last night,
Stood aw'd and breathless at the sight
Of one Egyptian girl ; and now
Wanders among these tombs, with brow
Pale, watchful, sad, as tho' he just,
Himself, had ris'n from out their dust !

Yet, so it is—and the same thirst
For something high and pure, above
This withering world, which, from the first,
Made me drink deep of woman's love,—
As the one joy, to heav'n most near
Of all our hearts can meet with here,—
Still burns me up, still keeps awake
A fever nought but death can slake.

Farewell ; whatever may befall,—
Or bright, or dark—thou'lt know it all

LETTER IV.

FROM THE SAME TO THE SAME.

WONDERS on wonders ; sights that lie

Where never sun gave flow'ret birth ;
Bright marvels, hid from th' upper sky,
And myst'ries that are born and die

Deep in the very heart of earth !—
All that the ancient Orpheus, led

By courage that Love only gives,
Dar'd for a matchless idol, dead,
I've seen and dar'd for one who lives.

Again the moon was up, and found
The echoes of my feet still round
The monuments of this lone place ;—

Or saw me, if awhile my lid
Yielded to sleep, stretch'd at the base
Of that now precious Pyramid,
In slumber that the gentlest stir,
The stillest, air-like step of her,
Whom ev'n in sleep I watch'd, could chase.
And then, such various forms she seem'd
To wear before me, as I dream'd !—

Now, like Neïtha, on her throne
At Saïs, all reveal'd she shone,
With that dread veil thrown off her brow,
Which mortal never rais'd till now ;*
Then, quickly chang'd, methought 'twas she
Of whom the Memphian boatmen tells
Such wondrous tales—fair Rhodope,
The subterranean nymph, that dwells
Mid sunless gems and glories hid,
The Lady of the Pyramid !

At length, from one of these short dreams
Starting—as if the subtile beams,
Then playing o'er my brow, had brought
Some sudden light into my thought—
Down for my boat-lamp to the shore,
Where still it palely burn'd, I went ;
Resolv'd that night to try once more
The mystery of this monument.

Thus arm'd, I scarce had reach'd the gate,
When a loud screaming—like the cry
Of some wild creature to its mate—
Came startling from the palm-grove nigh ;—

* See, for the veil of Neitha, the inscription upon her temple, as given by Plutarch, de Is. et Osir.

Or, whether haply 'twas the creak
Of those Lethæan portals,* said
To give thus out a mournful shriek,
When oped at midnight for the dead.
Whate'er it was, the sound came o'er
My heart like ice, as through the door
Of the small Pyramid I went,
And down the same abrupt descent,
And through long windings, as before,
Reach'd the steep marble corridor.

Trembling I stole along—the light
In the lone chapel still burn'd on ;
But she, for whom my soul and sight
Look'd with a thirst so keen, was gone,—
By some invisible path had fled
Into that gloom, and leaving the Dead
To its own solitary rest,
Of all lone things the loneliest.

As still the cross, which she had kist,
Was lying on the crystal shrine,
I took it up, nor could resist
(Though the dead eyes, I thought, met mine)

* The brazen portals at Memphis, mentioned by Zoega, called the Gates of Oblivion.

Kissing it too, while, half ashamed
Of that mute presence, I exclaimed,
“ Oh Life to Come, if in thy sphere
Love, Woman’s love, our heav’n could be,
Who would not ev’n forego it here,
To taste it there eternally ?”

Hopeless, yet with unwilling pace,
Leaving the spot, I turn’d to trace
My pathway back, when, to the right,
I could perceive, by my lamp’s light,
That the long corridor which, viewed
Through distance dim, had seem’d to end
Abruptly here, still on pursued
Its sinuous course, with snake-like bend
Mocking the eye, as down it wound
Still deeper through that dark profound.

Again, my hopes were rais’d, and, fast
As the dim lamp-light would allow,
Along that new-found path I past,
Through countless turns ; descending now
By narrow ducts, now, up again,
Mid columns, in whose date the chain
Of time is lost : and thence along
Cold halls, in which a sapless throng
Of Dead stood up, with glassy eye
Meeting my gaze, as I went by.—

Till, lost among these winding ways,
Coil'd round and round, like serpents' folds,
I thought myself in that dim maze
Down under Mæris' Lake, which holds
The hidden wealth of the Twelve Kings,
Safe from all human visitings.
At length, the path clos'd suddenly ;
And, by my lamp, whose glimmering fell
Now faint and fainter, I could see
Nought but the mouth of a huge well,
Gaping athwart my onward track,—
A reservoir of darkness, black
As witches' caldrons are, when filled
With moon-drugs in th' eclipse distill'd.
Leaning to look if foot might pass
Down through that chasm, I saw, beneath,
As far as vision could explore,
The jetty sides all smooth as glass,
Looking as if just varnish'd o'er
With that dark pitch the Sea of Death
Throws out upon its slimy shore.

Doubting awhile ; yet loth to leave
Aught unexplor'd, the chasm I tried
With nearer search ; and could perceive
An iron step that from the side

Stood dimly out ; while, lower still,
Another ranged, less visible,
But aptly plac'd, as if to aid
Th' adventurous foot, that dar'd the shade.
Though hardly I could deem that e'er
Weak woman's foot had ventured there,
Yet, urged along by the wild heat
That can do all things but retreat,
I placed my lamp,—which for such task
Was aptly shaped, like cap or casque
To fit the brow,—firm on my head,
And down into the darkness went ;
Still finding for my cautious tread
New foot-hold in that deep descent,
Which seem'd as tho' 'twould thus descend
In depth and darkness without end.
At length, this step-way ceas'd ; in vain
I sought some hold, that would sustain
My down-stretch'd foot—the polish'd side,
Slippery and hard, all help denied :
Till, as I bow'd my lamp around,
To let its now faint glimmer fall
On every side, with joy I found
Just near me, in the shining wall,
A window (which had 'scap'd my view
In that half shadow) and sprung through.

'Twas downward still, but far less rude—
By stairs that through the live rock wound
In narrow spiral round and round,
Whose giddy sweep my foot pursued
Till, lo, before a gate I stood,
Which opened, I saw, into the same
Deep well, from whence but now I came.
The doors were iron, yet gave way
Lightly before me, as the spray
Of a young lime-tree, that receives
Some wandering bird among its leaves.
But, soon as I had passed, the din,
Th' o'erwhelming din, with which again
They clash'd their folds, and closed me in,
Was such as seldom sky or main,
Or heaving earth, or all, when met
In angriest strife, e'er equalled yet.
It seem'd as if the ponderous sound
Was by a thousand echoes hurl'd
From one to th' other, through the round
Of this great subterranean world,
Till, far as from the catacombs
Of Alexandria to the Tombs
In ancient Thebes's Valley of Kings,
Rung its tremendous thunderings.

Yet could not ev'n this rude surprise,
Which well might move far bolder men,
One instant turn my charmed eyes
From the blest scene that hail'd them then.
As I had rightly deem'd, the place
Where now I stood was the well's base,
The bottom of the chasm ; and bright
Before me, through the massy bars
Of a huge gate, there came a light
Soft, warm, and welcome, as the stars
Of his own South are to the sight
Of one, who, from his sunny home,
To the chill North had dar'd to roam.

And oh the scene, now opening through
Those bars that all but sight denied !—
A long, fair alley, far as view
Could reach away, along whose side
Went, lessening to the end, a row
Of rich arcades, that, from between
Their glistening pillars, sent a glow
Of countless lamps, burning unseen,
And that still air, as from a spring
Of hidden light, illumining.
While—soon as the wild echoes rous'd
From their deep haunts again were hous'd,—

I heard a strain of holy song
Breathing from out the bright arcades
Into that silence—where, among
The high sweet voices of young maids,
Which, like the small and heav'n-ward spire
Of Christian temples, crown'd the choir,
I fancied, (such the fancy's sway)
Though never yet my ear had caught
Sound from her lips—yet, in that lay
So worthy of her looks, methought
'That maiden's voice I heard, o'er all
Most high and heavenly,—to my ear
Sounding distinctly, like the call
Of a far spirit from its sphere.

But vain the call—that stubborn gate
Like destiny, all force defied.
Anxious I look'd around—and, straight,
An opening to the left descried,
Which, though like hell's own mouth it seem'd,
Yet led, as by its course I deem'd,
Parallel with those lighted ways,
That 'cross the alley pour'd their blaze.
Eager I stoop'd, this path to tread,
When, suddenly, the wall o'er-head
Grew with a fitful lustre bright,
Which, settling gradual on the sight

Into clear characters of light,
These words on its dark ground I read.—

“ You, who would try
This terrible track,
To live, or to die,
But ne’er to look back ;

“ You, who aspire
To be purified there
By the terrors of Fire
And Water and Air ;

“ If danger and pain
And death you despise—
On—for again
Into light you may rise,—

“ Rise into light
With that Secret Divine
Now shrouded from sight
By the Veils of the Shrine !

“ But if ————— ”

The words here dimm’d away,
Till, lost in darkness, vague and dread,

Their very silence seem'd to say
Awfuller things than words e'er said.

"Am I then in the path," I cried,
"To the Great Mystery ? shall I see,
And touch,—perhaps, ev'n draw aside
Those venerable veils, which hide
The secret of Eternity !"

This thought at once reviv'd the zeal,
The thirst for Egypt's hidden lore
Which I had almost ceas'd to feel,
In the new dreams that won me o'er.
For now—oh happiness !—it seem'd
As if *both* hopes before me beam'd—
As if that spirit-nymph, whose tread
I trac'd down hither from above,
To more than one sweet treasure led—
Lighting me to the fountain-head
Of Knowledge by the star of Love.

Instant I enter'd—though the ray
Of my spent lamp was near its last,—
And quick through many a channel-way,
Ev'n ruder than the former, pass'd ;
Till, just as sunk the farewell spark,
I spied before me, through the dark,

A paly fire, that moment raised,
Which still as I approached it, blazed
With stronger light,—till, as I came
More near, I saw my pathway led
Between two hedges of live flame,—
Trees all on fire, whose branches shed
A glow that, without noise or smoke,
Yet strong as from a furnace, broke;
While o'er the glaring ground between,
Where my sole, onward path was seen,
Hot iron bars, red as with ire,
Transversely lay—such as, they tell,
Compose that trellis-work of fire,
Through which the Doom'd look out in hell.

To linger there was to be lost—
More and still more the burning trees
Clos'd o'er the path; and as I crost—
With tremour both in heart and knees—
Fixing my foot where'er a space
'Twixt the red bars gave resting-place,
Above me, each quick burning tree,
Tamarind, Balm of Araby,
And Egypt's Thorn combined to spread
A roof of fire above my head.
Yet safe—or with but harmless scorch—
I trod the flaming ordeal through;

And promptly seizing, as a torch
To light me on to dangers new,
A fallen bough that kindling lay
Across the path, pursued my way.

Nor went I far before the sound
Of downward torrents struck my ear;
And, by my torch's gleam, I found
That the dark space which yawn'd around,
Was a wide cavern, far and near
Fill'd with dark waters, that went by
Turbid and quick, as if from high
They late had dash'd down furiously;
Or, awfuller, had yet that doom
Before them, in the untried gloom.
No pass appear'd on either side;
And tho' my torch too feebly shone
To show what scowl'd beyond the tide,
I saw but *one* way left me—on!
So, plunging in, with my right hand
The current's rush I scarce withstood,
While, in my left, the failing brand
Shook its last glimmer o'er the flood.
'Twas a long struggle—oft I thought,
That, in that whirl of waters caught,
I must have gone, too weak for strife,
Down, headlong, at the cataract's will—

Sad fate for one, with heart and life
And all youth's sunshine round him still !
But, ere my torch was wholly spent,
I saw,—cutstretching from the shade
Into those waters, as if meant
To lend the drowning struggler aid—
A slender, double balustrade,
With snow-white steps between, ascending
From the grim surface of the stream,
Far up as eye could reach, and ending
In darkness there, like a lost dream.
That glimpse—for 'twas no longer—gave
New spirit to my strength ; and now,
With both arms combating the wave,
I rush'd on blindly, till my brow
Struck on that railway's lowest stair ;
When, gathering courage from despair,
I made one bold and fearful bound,
And on the step firm footing found.

But short that hope—for, as I flew
Breathlessly up, the stairway grew
Tremulous under me, while each
Frail step, ere scarce my foot could reach
The frailer yet I next must trust,
Crumbled behind me into dust ;
Leaving me, as it crush'd beneath,
Like shipwreck'd wretch who, in dismay,

Sees but one plank 'twixt him and death,
And shuddering feels that one give way !
And still I upward went—with nought
Beneath me but that depth of shade,
And the dark flood, from whence I caught
Each sound the falling fragments made.
Was it not fearful ?—still more frail
At every step crash'd the light stair,
While, as I mounted, ev'n the rail
That up into that murky air
Was my sole guide, began to fail !—
When stretching forth an anxious hand,
Just as, beneath my tottering stand,
Steps, railway, all, together went,
I touch'd a massy iron ring,
That there—by what kind genius sent
I know not—in the darkness hung ;
And grasping it, as drowners cling
To the last hold, so firm I clung,
And through the void suspended swung.

Sudden, as if that mighty ring
Were link'd with all the winds in heav'n,
And, like the touching of a spring,
My eager grasp had instant given
Loose to all blasts that ever spread
The shore or sea with wrecks and dead—

Around me, gusts, gales, whirlwinds rang
Tumultuous, and I seem'd to hang
Amidst an elemental war,

In which wing'd tempests—of all kinds
And strengths that winter's stormy star

Lights through the Temple of the Winds
In our own Athens—battled round,
Deafening me with chaotic sound.

Nor this the worst—for, holding still

With hands unmov'd, though shrinking oft,
I found myself, at the wild will

Of countless whirlwinds, caught aloft,
And round and round, with fearful swing,
Swept, like a stone-shot in a sling !

Till breathless, mazed, I had begun,—

So ceaselessly I thus was whirled,—
To think my limbs were chained upon

That wheel of the Infernal World,
To turn which, day and night, are blowing
Hot, withering winds that never slumber ;
And whose sad rounds, still going, going,
Eternity alone can number !

And yet, ev'n then—while worse than Fear

Hath ever dreamt seem'd hovering near,
Had voice but ask'd me, “ is not this

A price too dear for aught below ? ”
I should have said “ for knowledge, yes—
But for bright, glorious Woman—no.”

At last, that whirl, when all my strength
Had nearly fled, came to an end ;
And, through that viewless void, at length,
I felt the still-grasp'd ring descend
Rapidly with me, till my feet—
Oh, ne'er was touch of land so sweet
To the long sea-worn exile—found
A resting-place on the firm ground.
At the same instant o'er me broke
A glimmer through that gloom so chill,—
Like day-light, when beneath the yoke
Of tyrant darkness struggling still—
And by th' imperfect gleam it shed,
I saw before me a rude bed,
Where poppies, strew'd upon a heap
Of wither'd lotus, wooed to sleep.
Blessing that couch—as I would bless,
Ay, ev'n the absent tiger's lair,
For rest in such stark weariness,—
I crawl'd to it and sunk down there.

How long I slept, or by what means
Was wafted thence, I cannot say ;
But, when I woke—oh the bright scenes,
The glories that around me lay—
If ever yet a vision shone
On waking mortal, *this* was one !

But how describe it ? vain, as yet,
While the first dazzle dims my eyes,
All vain the attempt—I must forget
The flush, the newness, the surprise,
The vague bewilderment, that whelms,
Ev'n now, my every sense and thought,
Ere I can paint these sunless realms,
And their hid glories, as I ought.
While thou, if ev'n but *half* I tell
Wilt that but *half* believe—farewell !

LETTER V.

FROM ORCUS, HIGH PRIEST OF MEMPHIS, TO DECIUS,
THE PRÆTORIAN PREFECT.

REJOICE, my friend, rejoice :—the youthful Chief
Of that light Sect which mocks at all belief,
And, gay and godless, makes the present hour
Its only heaven, is now within our power.
Smooth, impious school !—not all the weapons aimed
At priestly creeds, since first a creed was framed,
E'er struck so deep as that sly dart they wield,
The Bacchant's pointed spear in laughing flowers conceal'd.

And oh, 'twere victory to this heart, as sweet
As any *thou* canst boast,—ev'n when the feet
Of thy proud war-steed wade through Christian blood,
To wrap this scoffer in Faith's blinding hood,
And bring him, tamed and prostrate, to implore
The vilest gods ev'n Egypt's saints adore.

What !—do these sages think, to *them* alone
The key of this world's happiness is known ?

That none but they, who make such proud parade
Of Pleasure's smiling favours, win the maid,
Or that Religion keeps no secret place,
No niche, in her dark fanes, for Love to grace ?
Fools ?—did they know how keen the zest that's given
To earthly joy, when seasoned well with heaven ;
How Piety's grave mask improves the hue
Of Pleasure's laughing features, half seen through,
And how the Priest, set aptly within reach
Of two rich worlds, traffics for bliss with each,
Would they not, Decius,—thou, whom th' ancient tie
'Twixt Sword and Altar makes our best ally,—
Would they not change their creed, their craft, for ours ?
Leave the gross daylight joys, that, in their bowers,
Languish with too much sun, like o'er-blown flowers,
For the veil'd loves, the blisses undisplay'd
That slily lurk within the Temple's shade ?
And, 'stead of haunting the trim Garden's school,—
Where cold Philosophy usurps a rule,
Like the pale moon's, o'er passion's heaving tide ;
Where pleasure, cramp'd and chill'd by wisdom's pride,
Counts her own pulse's regulated play,
And in dull dreams dissolves her life away,—
Be taught by *us*, quit shadows for the true,
Substantial joys we sager Priests pursue,—
Who, far too wise to theorize on bliss,
Or pleasure's substance for its shade to miss,
Preach *other* worlds, but live for only *this* :—

Thanks to the well-paid Mystery round us flung,
Which, like its type, the golden cloud that hung
O'er Jupiter's love-couch its shade benign,
Round human frailty wraps a veil divine.

Still less should they presume, weak wits, that they
Alone despise the craft of us who pray ;—
Still less their creedless vanity deceive
With the fond thought, that we who pray believe.
Believe !—Apis forbid—forbid it, all
Ye monster Gods, before whose shrines we fall,—
Deities, framed in jest, as if to try
How far gross Man can vulgarize the sky ;
How far the same low fancy that combines
Into a drove of brutes yon zodiac's signs,
And turns that Heaven itself into a place
Of sainted sin and deified disgrace,
Can bring Olympus ev'n to shame more deep,
Stock it with things that earth itself holds cheap.
Fish, flesh, and fowl, the kitchen's sacred brood,
Which Egypt keeps for worship, not for food,—
All, worthy idols of a Faith that sees
In dogs, cats, owls, and apes, divinities !

Believe !—oh, Decius, thou, who hast no care
Of things divine, beyond the soldier's share,

Y Who takes on trust the faith for which he bleeds,
A good, fierce God to swear by, all he needs,—
Little canst thou, whose creed around thee hangs
Loose as thy summer war-cloak, guess the pangs
Of loathing and self-scorn with which a heart,
Stubborn as mine is, acts the zealot's part,—
The deep and dire disgust with which I wade
Through the foul juggling of this holy trade,—
/ This mud profound of mystery, where the feet,
At every step, sink deeper in deceit. /
Oh! many a time, when, mid the Temple's blaze,
O'er prostrate fools the sacred cist I raise,
Did I not keep still proudly in my mind
The power this priestcraft gives me o'er mankind,—
A lever, of more might, in skilful hand,
'To move this world, than Archimede e'er plann'd,—
I should, in vengeance of the shame I feel
At my own mockery, crush the slaves that kneel
Besotted round; and,—like that kindred breed
Of reverend, well-drest crocodiles they feed,
At famed Arsinoë,*—make my keepers bless,
With their last throb, my sharp-fang'd Holiness.

Say, *is* it to be borne, that scoffers, vain
Of their own freedom from the altar's chain,

* For the trinkets with which the sacred Crocodiles were ornamented, see the Epicurean, chap. 10.

Should mock thus all that thou thy blood hast sold,
And I my truth, pride, freedom, to uphold ?
It must not be :—think'st thou that Christian sect,
Whose followers, quick as broken waves, erect
Their crests anew and swell into a tide,
That threats to sweep away our shrines of pride—
Think'st thou, with all their wondrous spells, ev'n they
Would triumph thus, had not the constant play
Of Wit's resistless archery clear'd their way ?—
That mocking spirit, worst of all the foes,
Our solemn fraud, our mystic mummary knows,
Whose wounding flash thus ever 'mong the signs
Of a fast-falling creed, prelusive shines,
Threatening such change as do the awful freaks
Of summer lightning, ere the tempest breaks.

But, to my point,—a youth of this vain school,
But one, whom Doubt itself hath failed to cool
Down to that freezing point, where Priests despair
Of any spark from th' altar catching there,—
Hath, some nights since,—it was, methinks, the night
That followed the full moon's great annual rite,—
Through the dark, winding ducts, that downward stray
To these earth-hidden temples, track'd his way,
Just at that hour when, round the Shrine, and me,
The choir of blooming nymphs thou long'st to see,
Sing their last night-hymn in the Sanctuary.

The clangour of the marvellous Gate, that stands
At the Well's lowest depth,—which none but hands
Of new, untaught adventurers, from above,
Who know not the safe path, e'er dare to move,—
Gave signal that a foot profane was nigh :—
'Twas the Greek youth, who, by that morning's sky,
Had been observed, curiously wandering round
The mighty fanes of our sepulchral ground.

Instant, th' Initiate's Trials were prepared,—
The Fire, Air, Water ; all that Orpheus dared,
That Plato, that the bright-hair'd Samian* pass'd,
With trembling hope, to come to—*what*, at last ?
Go, ask the dupes of Myst'ry ; question him
Who, mid terrific sounds and spectres dim,
Walks at Eleusis ; ask of those, who brave
The dazzling miracles of Mithra's Cave,
With its seven starry gates ; ask all who keep
Those terrible night-myst'ries where they weep
And howl sad dirges to the answering breeze,
O'er their dead Gods, their mortal Deities,—
Amphibious, hybrid things, that died as men,
Drown'd, hang'd, empaled, to rise, as gods, again ;—
Ask *them*, what mighty secret lurks below
This sev'n-fold mystery—can they tell thee ? No ;
(Gravely they keep that only secret, well
And fairly kept,—that they have none to tell ;

* Pythagoras.

And, duped themselves, console their humbled pride }
By duping thenceforth all mankind beside.

And such th' advance in fraud since Orpheus' time,—
That earliest master of our craft sublime,—
So many minor Mysteries, imps of fraud,
From the great Orphic Egg have wing'd abroad,
That, still to' uphold our Temple's ancient boast,
And seem most holy, we must cheat the most ;
Work the best miracles, wrap nonsense round
In pomp and darkness, till it seems profound ;
Play on the hopes, the terrors of mankind,
With changeful skill ; and make the human mind
Like our own Sanctuary, where no ray,
But by the Priest's permission, wins its way,—
Where, through the gloom as wave our wizard rods,
Monsters, at will, are conjured into Gods ;
While Reason, like a grave-faced mummy, stands,
With her arms swathed in hieroglyphic bands.

But chiefly in the skill with which we use
Man's wildest passions for Religion's views,
Yoking them to her car like fiery steeds,
Lies the main art in which our craft succeeds.
And oh be blest, ye men of yore, whose toil
Hath, for our use, scoop'd out of Egypt's soil

This hidden Paradise, this mine of fanes,
Gardens, and palaces, where Pleasure reigns
In a rich, sunless empire of her own,
With all earth's luxuries lighting up her throne ;—
A realm for mystery made, which undermines
The Nile itself and, 'neath the Twelve Great Shrines
That keep Initiation's holy rite,
Spreads its long labyrinths of unearthly light,
A light that knows no change,—its brooks that run
Too deep for day, its gardens without sun,
Where soul and sense, by turns, are charm'd, surprised,
And all that bard or prophet e'er devised
For man's Elysium, priests have realized.

Here, at this moment,—all his trials past,
And heart and nerve unshrinking to the last,—
The young Initiate roves,—as yet left free
To wander through this realm of mystery,
Feeding on such illusions as prepare
The soul, like mist o'er waterfalls, to wear
All shapes and hues, at Fancy's varying will,
Through every shifting aspect, vapour still ;—
Vague glimpses of the Future, vistas shown,
By scenic skill, into that world unknown,
Which saints and sinners claim alike their own ;
And all those other witching, wildering arts,
Illusions, terrors, that make human hearts,

Ay, ev'n the wisest and the hardiest, quail
To *any* goblin throned behind a veil.

Yes,—such the spells shall haunt his eye, his ear,
Mix with his night-dreams, form his atmosphere ;
'Till, if our Sage be not tamed down, at length,
His wit, his wisdom, shorn of all their strength,
Like Phrygian priests, in honour of the shrine,—
If he become not absolutely mine,
Body and soul, and, like the tame decoy
Which wary hunters of wild doves employ,
Draw converts also, lure his brother wits
To the dark cage where his own spirit flits,
And give us, if not saints, good hypocrites,—
If I effect not this, then be it said
The ancient spirit of our craft hath fled,
Gone with that serpent-god the Cross hath chased
To hiss its soul out in the Theban waste.

THE END.

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